
Director General for Regulation

Neil McIvor
Chief Data Officer and Chief Statistician
Department for Education
(by email)

30 May 2019

Dear Neil

Department for Education funding statistics

I am writing following our correspondence last year^{1,2}. As you know, I welcome the improvements made to enhance the quality and trustworthiness of statements released by the Department for Education, and the ongoing work to improve the value of your statistics, through the development of the Department's website.

Despite these improvements, we continue to hear concerns from the public about some statements made by the Department and its Ministers.

Your department has strived to improve the technical accuracy of statements made on school funding. However, we have concerns with the presentation of school funding figures. For example, we recently received complaints about the Minister of State for School Standards' use of school spending figures on the Channel 4 news³. It was not clear from the Minister's statements that he was referring to schools' budget for 5 to 16 years olds only. While data published by the Institute for Fiscal Studies does support his claims, we noted this data is difficult to find, and requires additional analysis.

I believe it would help support public understanding if the Department were to publish a consistent and comprehensive set of official statistics on school funding, to which all participants in public debate could refer. A separate annex⁴ sets out further information on this recommendation.

We have also heard concerns about other statistics used by the Department's Ministers. For example, we received a complaint about the replicability of music GCSE figures by the Minister of State for School Standards in an oral evidence session in the House of Commons⁵, and another about the use⁶ of statistics about the improved outcomes for sponsored academies since 2010 which was based on analysis up until the end of October 2017.

In light of these issues, we have discussed the importance of ensuring that statements are based on accurate, up to date analysis, which can be verified through publicly available data and analysis.

¹ <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/correspondence/letter-to-neil-mcivor-regarding-department-for-education-statistics/>

² <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/correspondence/response-to-statements-regarding-school-funding/>

³ <https://www.channel4.com/news/education-minister-nick-gibb-abolishing-sats-would-be-hugely-retrograde-step>

⁴ <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/correspondence/department-for-education-funding-statistics-2/>

⁵ <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/digital-culture-media-and-sport-committee/the-social-impact-of-participation-in-culture-and-sport/oral/93899.html%20-%20blank>

⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/education-secretary-calls-on-more-schools-to-become-an-academy>

I welcome your team's on-going work to improve transparency of statements in an efficient way. In addition, I would encourage you to focus on not just whether the statements correctly quote the statistics, but also whether, in the context, the use being made of them is liable to mislead.

I have separately written to the Department's Permanent Secretary, highlighting the importance of the development of a school funding official statistic publication.

I would be happy to discuss these recommendations further.

Your sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ed Humpherson', written in a cursive style.

Ed Humpherson
Director General for Regulation